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Revisiting Star Studies
Culture Lab, Newcastle University, 12–14 June 2013

A Report by Jennifer O'Meara, Trinity College Dublin

According to the conference website, the aim of “Revisiting Star Studies”, organised by Professor Guy Austin and Dr Sabrina Yu (Newcastle University), was “to reassess some of the dominant models in star studies, and generate new critical paradigms that are more appropriate to address non-Hollywood stardom”.¹ The programme included over seventy delegates from twelve countries, a diversity reflected in papers addressing stardom in, among other places, Denmark, Algeria, Pakistan, the Czech Republic and Korea. Aside from exploring stardom in various national and transnational contexts, the conference highlighted underexplored areas, such as ageing stars, aberrant stars and the implications of digital media for stardom.

The conference lasted three days and included eighteen panels, three keynote talks and a keynote panel. Proceedings began with a keynote by Neepa Majumdar (University of Pittsburgh), entitled “Listening to Stardom: Considerations of the Voice in Star Studies”. Using Shahrukh Khan as a case study, she considered “what it means to listen to stars in specific socio-historical contexts”.² Majumdar also outlined the complicated acoustic environment of which the actor’s acoustic signature is one crucial part, highlighting various combinations of star voice and star body, which includes the kind of playback singing common in Bollywood. The complexities of the keynote were further teased out in the accompanying panel on “Star Voices”. Ann Davies’s (Newcastle University) case study on Penelope Cruz identified the actress’s alternation between two distinct vocal styles; something Davies convincingly argued helped Cruz to win an Oscar for *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Woody Allen, 2008). Staying in Spain, Tom Whittaker’s (University of Liverpool) study of dubbing actor Constantino Romero, otherwise known as “la voz”, further demonstrated the importance of voice to star persona: Romero’s widespread fame was based on his inclusion on countless soundtracks, with his image rarely seen. Attendance at this panel was relatively sparse and, judging by delegates’ subsequent discussion of Faye Wood’s (University of Reading) paper on “Ryan Gosling’s Face: American Masculinity and the Reluctant Man of Action in *Drive*” (which took place simultaneously in the “Performing Action: The Face & Body of Contemporary Male Stardom” panel), it would seem that film scholars, like the broader viewing public, can get caught up in star hype. At the very least, attendees were curious to gain a better understanding of Gosling’s rapid rise to stardom. Beside Faye Wood’s paper on Ryan Gosling, this parallel panel was rounded out with studies on the body of Jason Statham and Tom Cruise by Lucy Fife Donaldson (University of St. Andrews) and Lisa Purse (University of Reading), respectively.

After lunch, the second keynote lecture was provided by Yingjin Zhang (University of California-San Diego) who, in a paper on play and liminality in Chinese cinema entitled

“Film Stars in the Perspective of Performance Studies”, focused on Tony Leung’s performances in *In The Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-Wai, 2000) and *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007). As coeditor of *Chinese Film Stars*, Zhang is well placed to lead discussions on stardom in Asia. However, one interesting aspect of stardom considered in the following panel “Stars and Ageing (1)” —the notion of a “forgotten” or “invisible” star—seems less region-specific. Gillian Kelly (University of Glasgow) dealt with that subject in a paper on Robert Taylor, who has been largely overlooked, despite being married to Barbara Stanwyck and holding the longest contract in studio history (he was signed to MGM for nearly thirty years). Indeed, few attending the panel were even familiar with his name. Kelly’s paper implied the value of approaching the issue of stardom from the reverse perspective: what qualities do *not* make a star. In the case of Taylor, a conventionally attractive, white, heterosexual, American male, Kelly argued that he was simply too “normal”. This suggests that configuring stardom still seems to involve the identification of inherent contradictions. Likewise, in a paper entitled “Melanie Griffith: Vulgarity, Excess and Ageing Disgracefully”, Lucy Bolton (Queen Mary, University of London) argued that Griffith’s enduring success (despite the negative persona traits in the title) can be explained by her embodiment of paradox: a womanly, often nude body, which emits a babyish voice; and a remarkably stable family life versus an appearance that has changed with plastic surgery.

Themes from the formal conference proceedings extended into the evening activities, including a screening of *Behind the Candelabra* (Steven Soderbergh, 2013) in a nearby cinema. The film was a fitting choice, both as a portrait of celebrity loneliness and the kind of plastic surgery addiction discussed in several papers.

In what proved to be a conference highlight, day two opened with a keynote panel consisting of the editors and authors of the new BFI Film Stars series. Two esteemed scholars, Pam Cook (University of Southampton) and Ginette Vincendeau (Kings College London), gave insightful papers on “Nicole Kidman’s Artful Acting: How to Be an Actress and a Star” and “Bardot and the Origins of Star Studies”, respectively. Each had researched their subject extensively for their respective monographs. Also, the editors (Martin Shingler and Susan Smith) candidly discussed their ambitions for a long-running series. As Shingler (University of Sunderland) noted, when writing a star monograph, one becomes so immersed in the details of that person’s life that, effectively, one is living with them. He therefore warned that, as with any long-term relationship, deciding to write such a monograph is a serious commitment. Also valuable, particularly to emerging scholars in attendance, was Smith’s (University of Sunderland) discussion of the difficulties of limiting focus and word count for her book on Elizabeth Taylor. Conferences tend to focus, understandably, on research outputs and conclusions, which made this panel’s insights into the complexities of the writing process a refreshing change.

Later in the day, in the panel on “Aberrant and Unusual Stardom”, which included Johnny Walker’s (De Montfort University) astute analysis of the branding of cult English actor Danny Dyer, Lin Feng (University of Hull) provided a counterpoint to the preceding day’s discussion of female stars and plastic surgery. Feng’s paper “‘I’m Ugly, but Gentle’: Performing *xiaorenwu* (little character) in Chinese Comedies” focused on the trend in Chinese cinema for ugly male stars (*chouxing*), a phenomenon that emerged in the late 1980s. She argued that this male character type is not marginalised by his unattractive appearance, with China’s patriarchal society allowing him (and the actors who have become stars as a result) a powerful voice, despite clear physical imperfections. A delegate unfamiliar with *chouxing* cinema later asked whether such a trend also exists with female Chinese stars. The

negative response to this question seems important, since it sums up the enduring expectation and increased pressure for female stars to be, and remain, attractive, as reflected in several papers on ageing.

Day two ended with a panel on “Transmedia Stardom”, something particularly relevant to contemporary star studies, given the wealth of extrafilmic materials that now accompanies each film release. Sarah Gilligan’s (Hartlepool College) analysis of the crucial roles of fashion and fandom in Emma Watson’s celebrity highlighted how a star’s on-screen presence is increasingly secondary to that of their offscreen—or computer-screen—one. This is nothing new, but what has changed, with the rise of fan sites, blogs and the real-time sharing of photos and information, is the fan’s ability to digitally alter and/or propagate the star’s image. Gilligan pointed out inconsistencies in Watson’s image (such as the high fashion brands for which she models, and the ethical fashion she personally endorses), while on day three Joshua Gulam’s (University of Manchester) paper on George Clooney as “star-turned-philanthropist” drew attention to a strong coherence between Clooney’s humanitarian work and the acclaim his “issue movies” have received. Like Gilligan, Gulam drew on extrafilmic elements of the star persona to suggest they play as big a role in the creation of Clooney’s persona as does his acting. However, as Niamh Thornton (University of Ulster) demonstrated in a paper on “Betwixt and Between: Gender and Mexican Film Stars Online”, contemporary media need not be reserved solely for contemporary stardom. Thornton instead showed how the personas of Mexican film stars from the 1930s to the 1950s have “continued to evolve online” through YouTube fan videos, with notable differences emerging between those of male and female stars.

Stephanie Dennison (University of Leeds) delivered the final keynote of the conference, entitled “‘I’m Different from You’: Xuxa and the Notion of Whiteness in Brazil”. In questioning the suitability of Richard Dyer’s tropes of whiteness in *White* in relation to Latin American stars, Dennison’s exploration of Xuxa (the public name of Maria de Graça Meneghel), provided exactly the kind of critical refocusing that the conference sought. More generally, the conference succeeded in the aims set out by its organisers, Austin and Yu: dominant models of Hollywood-centered stardom were questioned, with the star systems of Europe, Asia and Latin America all given considerable attention. Also, through the incorporation of Edgar Morin’s 1957 book, *Les Stars*, Ginette Vincendeau’s paper on day two served as reminder that, prior to the success of Richard Dyer’s *Stars* over two decades later, the first detailed study of film stardom came from a non-Hollywood context. By the end of the conference, then, the feeling was that, despite three packed days, the topic remains far from exhausted. In fact, within the U.K. alone, two other conferences on stardom were already scheduled: “Cinematic Reflections on Stardom and the ‘Stardom Film’” in September 2013 at King’s College London, and “Exploring British Film and Television Stardom” at Queen Mary, University of London in November 2013.³ The revisiting of this field continues.

Notes

¹ See <http://culturelab.ncl.ac.uk/starstudies/>

² See Neepa Majumdar’s abstract at: culturelab.ncl.ac.uk/starstudies/doc/StarStudiesProgrammeFINAL.docx

³ On the former, see the report by Shelagh M. Rowan-Legg in this issue of *Alphaville*.

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